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Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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NURSERY ARTISTS.

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[This is the text of a paper given to the Reading Branch of the P.N.E.U. on November 24th, 1905, and illustrated with a selection of the children's drawings under notice. Without the illustrations the paper is comparatively ineffective; but it is hoped that parents who take any interest in the question may collect for themselves similar sets of drawings; that is to say, drawings done by children not as lessons or tasks of copying, but spontaneously and independently. The value of an extensive collection, from many different families, each drawing dated to show its place in the series, would be very great as material towards the study of education in art.]

"Most folk thinks a deal of their children," said a North-countryman, "but mine is summat particular." It is because I don't think so that I make the rather bold venture of talking about the old sketches of my family, knowing that there is nothing "particular" in them, but that they represent what is going on in many, if not most, nurseries. "To teach the child we must observe him," and there has been too little systematic observation of the beginnings of art in its infantile manifestations. Authorities on education have collected and published children's drawings: but most of these—all that I have seen—are either drawings at school, when the scholars are already under external influence, or casual and disconnected examples, not showing truly the natural progress of children from the start in babyhood to the time when their own instincts and tastes are lost in acquired ideals and accomplishments. There does not seem to be any such record of infantile evolution in art, as there is in literature: for example, in Ruskin's early poems, or in the fascinating and pathetic biographies of Pet Marjorie and Mr. Canton's *W.V.*

When the *Parents' Review* was founded, I was asked to take a correspondence class in drawing, as a branch of the P.N.E.U. work. My idea of the commission was that I should provide parents and governesses with some scheme for helping young children in their sketching, by simple and graduated lessons, which would go on without the help of a professional teacher,

and without the apparatus of a regular drawing-school. But I felt at the same time that I was much in the dark—though I knew something about teachers' work—as to the kind of help young children needed, and the sort of teaching they would naturally and wholesomely assimilate. To study that problem, I began to collect my own children's scribbles; and in order to make the experiment more thorough, I was careful that they should be allowed to draw without interference, following their own fancies and impulses, with nothing but the most general encouragement, and no advice, but "Go on!" About once a year, not oftener on the average, I gave them a lesson—and was rather pleased than otherwise, to find how very little effect it had on their spontaneous work. No doubt they did learn something by those occasional lessons, but usually the teaching ran, as we say, like water from a duck's back, and they went on with their own play as before. The lessons were really a sort of examination to see what they could do, if put to it: they might have been treated otherwise and learnt more; but I believe they finally lost nothing by running wild till ten or twelve, and they gained one great point—they never were wearied with drawing, nor learnt to regard it as a task.

One can almost reckon the wet days of the Nineties in the Lake district, by the dates of their productions. When they could not go out, and games were exhausted, they nearly always took to scribbling as a last resource. When Christmas or birthdays were near, they knew that pictures would be received with thanks, and they did what they could for presents. Their sketches were made in these fits of energy, or when their parents were sketching, and they naturally imitated what they saw going on. That, of course, was a stimulus not found in all families; but there are few nurseries where children do not draw, if they know that when they turn out a scrawl it will not be laughed at, and that the time spent in almost formless scribbling will not be counted as waste.

The sketches here commented upon are samples out of a large number preserved, not because they were thought wonderful or comic, but simply to record progress. We did not think that any of the children showed the least talent, and I do not now think that any of the drawings are the work

of budding genius. You may laugh at them, as their producers now do, but they are not evidences of a turn for grotesque or caricature art. They are normal children's work, showing only their continuous advance up to 10 and 11, when their own efforts, practically unaided, brought them to the stage of the student whom to teach is some use and pleasure, for by that age he is ripe for learning.

The very earliest of their attempts, up to the age of three, were on slates, or out-of-doors on stones, in the Giottesque style. Some were on paper, with pencil and colour, quite formless at first, and then in each case settling down into certain simple rudimentary patterns. Before they dreamt of drawing faces, or boats, or trains, they had to find out how to control their hands—and that came naturally. They made rounds, and crosses, letters of the alphabet—one, I remember, at one-and-a-half, clamouring “draw B.Y. Baby.” They covered pages with scribble in imitation of writing, and would gravely read from their manuscript, unable to conceive that grown-up people's writing was anyway different. They came to zig-zags—not meaning water, and squares—not meaning houses, but simply patterns; and blossomed into elaborate spirals long before they had any idea of representing natural forms. This went on in each case much the same, till about the age of three, when they began to make the discovery that real things could be sketched. From this point I can trace their separate courses onward, with a certain individuality in each, but a striking similarity in general progress.

Of the eldest, no sketches were kept before the age of five, when she could read and write. She was then under a Swiss governess, but not taught drawing. At this time we started the Fésole Club, in connection with the *Parents' Review*, and the first month's exercise was a lemon or orange. The studies made, and talk about them fired her with emulation, and she, too, produced her orange, done in the style of simple outline with washes of colour, as recommended to the beginners in the class. It shows no execution whatever, though some observation; and she went back to her scribbles for the rest of the year, drawing fairies and fancies, with much attention to the ornamental details of their costumes and

accessories. Nearing six, she awoke to drawing from objects, with attempts at portrait and landscape, quite well observed, but very rudimentary in handling. Then began an interest in architectural subjects, started by the attempt to reproduce (not copy) a print of a Swiss hotel with *dépendance* and bridge; the windows all impossibly placed, and the whole thing absurd, but suggestive of romantic and far-away buildings which soon took shape as palaces and castles. Her notion of Wordsworth's “Corner of Wood Street when daylight appears,” is that of a lone house in Wordsworth's country, but red, because London houses are of brick. These country children could hardly realise town: a smaller sister, talking of a visit intended, said “Of course, I know there aren't fields at Gower Street; I suppose there is just a little grass along the side of the road.”

At seven, palaces and fairies combined and produced the first of many large views, full of detail and colour, which if properly drawn and painted would be Florentine old masters. The hints came, no doubt, from Walter Crane and Burne Jones, but much of her early inspiration must have been got from Lacroix' *Art of the Middle Ages*, which, as a very small child she liked to pore over: she knew it as “The lady-having-dinner book,” and pretty nearly destroyed the copy by continual handling. But this romantic turn did not prevent her from trying views from nature. A sketch of her home is quite recognisable (summer, age 7); the line of the hills opposite is accurately given; and quick colour-blots of sunsets are only failures because she put the moon wrong way round, or made the sun dark on the sky—errors of older artists too. Then hearing about Venice, she illustrated her ideas of the place in many daubs of the winter; but going to stay in Bristol (summer, age 8), tried the suspension bridge with some success.

By this time she came—through using colour—to want more than outline in black and white. “A Girl on a Donkey” is a reminiscence of fact seen (the donkey wasn't so lean, really) and shows an idea of action in the flying hair, and of local tone in the shading. Reverting at times to a less advanced manner, especially in illustrations to the many little books which she now began to write and design, and in

the sketch of the "Three Princesses" for a favourite song, she produced in the winter (age 8) a set of compositions hinted by the play of *Cinderella*; and the striving after action appears again in the "Dancing Girls" of that year. The old love for Oriental magnificence haunted her throughout her childhood. Many elaborate coloured groups of Japanese, and detailed outlines of imaginary scenes to illustrate her stories of Eastern princesses who lived in Lawn Village (the garden at home) alternated with bits of comedy, or domestic scenes like "The Scotch Reel," in which the persons and surroundings are all exactly as she knew them, though as she herself appears in the picture, of course, it is not "from nature." When she did draw from nature, under supervision, as in the "Potato," where there is full colour and modelling, all this gradually acquired power shows itself. Relapsing again into a sketch "out of her head," there is the old conventional childishness, with elaboration in the details of "The Park," but trying once more at nature, from the favourite point of view at Tennyson's Seat (already sketched at five), some influence of that isolated lesson may be traced in the brown tints and gradations. We can all draw so much better from nature than out of our heads.

At nine, she produced a great deal of fancy illustration; many little books with pictures of figures in action, though without perspective or anatomy, usually not graceful or pretty, even when the intent was to be pretty, and with more turn for the literary subject than any premonitions of artistic power. The *Daily Graphic* became her model, and she took to the pen, getting more firmness in the line, and she copied bits she liked, as if to learn the secret. Her Oriental subjects still went on, as in the Carpaccioesque view of "Oomidraska Seaport," one of her fancy places. At last, when she had turned eleven, her faces began to get pretty, and her figures had arms and hands, not mere ribbons with fringes: she copied Du Maurier with careful fac-simile, and when models sat for her parents, tried to paint them. The result is foreshadowed in the last sketch of the series (age 11) of a boy gathering fruit, rapid and fairly correct.

After this she was more often overlooked and guided in her sketching, and improved rapidly because she could now

see for herself. In seven years more she was working at a drawing-school as a student, intending to take up art professionally.

The second child begins here at four, with an attempt at sketching landscape from nature. It is meant to represent a waterfall on a crag, the White Lady, we call it, because it comes with rainy weather and disappears again like a ghost. But on the same paper are rudimentary figures, little girls with flowers, and faces already showing more feeling for prettiness than her sister caught. Then, having turned five, she attempted the same Swiss hotel which her sister had already sketched, but so differently rendered as to preclude the idea that it was a direct copy: at that age children hardly copy, they try to reproduce their idea of the subject. She began to attempt profiles, too chinny, and quite a different type from the ideal she adopted three years later. A row of tiny girls in colour is an example of the miniature scale on which she often worked—as for instance a microscopic book made for her doll; she was the only one of the family who took dolls seriously. Then, from a number, I have selected a characteristic coloured lady, with flower-pots—I fancy, meant for mother "doing the flowers" in the morning room; and a sketch of primroses.

Just turned six she painted her idea of the house to which her sister had gone on a visit, with the sister and the little boy who was there, mightily disproportionate to the doll-house scale of her building, but with some result of colour and pictorial effect. She was trying for better faces, and the next page shows how she learnt: getting her mother to sketch her a copy, and improving rapidly because the initiative came from herself. The result lasted; the fairies coming to a tea party, and the big group at the Christmas tree—idealized into a royal company, with crowned king and queen superintending the revels—show the advance in the full face, though the profiles remain grotesque. About this time, many of her fancy sketches have rainbows in them, and she drew churches and boats, houses and interiors, ideal landscapes based on home scenes, and quantities of illustrations to her own stories. All these have touches of observation in them, along with ridiculous errors; her moon is always the wrong



way round, just as children write *boustrophedon*, and are never, for some years, sure whether things go from left to right or right to left. Her "Princess Arâma's Dream" bears on the back her description of what it is intended to represent: you find that this queer creature was in her mind's eye "a most beautiful, beautiful, lovely lady." So early Van Eyck's motto applies to our work, "Als ik kan, nit als ik will."

The age of seven brought great advance with the illustration to Blake's "Little Black Boy." She saw some form in sleeves, if not in arms, from the first; and caught a trick of plausible action and proportion earlier than her elder sister. Just before this she had found a slight profile of a pretty girl's head, on a bit of card, and tried to reproduce it on the other side, with great improvement as to her profile faces. The "Coniston Old Man in Snow," is not so accurate as her sister's earlier attempts at landscape, but it is more effective with its Chinese white on gray paper; and the "Dancing Girls," reminiscent of Kate Greenaway, though not copied, are already beginning to show grace and spontaneous composition. The attempt at action in the "Flower Procession," and a pretty face with impossible figure, show where she was at 8: and then follows her first chiaroscuro in two "lovely ladies" in the darksome wood. Thinking that she was beginning to see light and shade, I set her to paint a tennis ball, and then a boot—which she did fairly, without help other than direction; but the next drawings betray no trace of the teaching. Landscape and domestic scenes were dropped for fairyland, and at nine she began to get hands and arms to match her faces, and by continual practice to suggest pretty scenes and figures in them: Pryce Jones' catalogues afforded many hints and copies.

Then, at ten, she took to Du Maurier with her sister, and sketched the same models from the life, to the great improvement of her work. She, too, has become an art student; the notion sometimes expressed, that children's untaught scribbling "spoils their touch," and gets them into bad ways of work, appears to be entirely without reason, to judge from these two cases.

The only boy of the family was more precocious than the girls: he picked up reading and writing earlier, and with less teaching, and scribbled from about one-and-a-half, working

up to elaborate patterns, especially spirals, at three. Then going to the seaside he took notice, as all children do, of boats and trains, and began to draw them. The first specimen is his panoramic or diagrammatic view of home-surroundings, inserting the features which he found of interest, and writing their names in capital letters, sometimes backwards. Across the lake, from his home, he saw the Old Man rising above the railway—which, of course, is quite disproportionate—but he drew the train on its way beneath the railway bridge to Foxfield; the coach and horse from Ambleside in the middle distance, and nearer, the lake with the steamer and its captain (his especial hero), and its boathouse and pier quite correctly observed, with people on the pier waiting for the boat. "Daddy," by no means flattered, is in the foreground. A couple of months later he tried his hand at portraits, and endeavoured to solve the problem of profile and side face. Then, still at three, he sketched his idea of Switzerland, and made many tries at boats and trains, beginning already to give some effect of breadth in light and dark. His feeling for broad effect is shown strongly in his "Sunset over the Hills," at four; the sun, of course, has a face in it, but the rest is fairly naturalistic, and shows, if not artistic talent, some definite power of observation. Indeed, the chief use of children's drawing is to cultivate observation: even though the drawings themselves are worthless, every attempt from nature means a good look at facts, and results in much closer acquaintance with them than any book-reading or pointing out by a teacher can possibly give. The illustration of fancies, which usually goes hand-in-hand with sketching from nature, has its value also; to cultivate imagination and emotion, and to keep it in healthy channels, is as valuable as the search after fact. Both naturally go together, and react on one another; and one need not be afraid of letting young children sketch their fancies freely. Of all the great mass of drawings these infants produced, none were ugly or base in intention.

At five, he drew his notions of Venice—like the others at the time—along with boats and trains; sometimes out of his head, and sometimes from nature. The sketch of the lake with steamer, seen from the Water-foot was, I think, done while I was sketching the same subject, though not as

a lesson, and it gives all the points of the scene. His "Port Arthur" was suggested by the view in the *Daily Graphic*, but not copied from it; another similar attempt represented the Tower Bridge, just then built. At five, he began to make books—"The Travels of Tom and Jack," with hardly any text except under each page, "Here they are going for a sail in their boats"; and then, "The Travels of Tinty and Binty," with ships, trains, roped mountaineers on a snow-slope, fjords, ravines and bridges, in many successive volumes: then, "The Travels of Thorstein," chiefly naval, and concerned with catastrophes to torpedo boats, though the text here and there shows a sudden interest in runes; and finally, that year, "Susie's Wish," a book in two volumes, with no text at all, but manifold illustrations.

At six, landscape improved, and his Easter sketch gives something of the sentiment of northern spring, with the road and river going away into the bleak hills, among scattered trees and primroses. He, too, became smitten, like his elder sister, with Oriental ideals, and designed Eastern palaces, and invented a land of which he made elaborate maps, wrote the history of its kings and wars, drew the strange birds and fabulous beasts in many volumes, and even worked out a language, with dictionary and grammar, in curious minuteness. I used sometimes to think it almost a waste of time, but looking back I doubt whether it was not trouble well spent, for I find that something of the same sort is quite common among youngsters who have not entirely failed in after life. It meant activity of mind, and a reflex of interest in studies hardly yet begun: and it did not imply inactivity of body, as the sketch of tree tops, from the tree-climber's point of view, may prove, if proof be needed.

He had just turned seven, when he painted the boot, for a lesson with the others, and I think it was followed by a good painting of a model yacht, in which he naturally took more interest. But like the others, the lesson showed little trace in his subsequent work: he went on with ideal views of Iceland and "Sirioui," his Eastern realm of fancy; and still drew boats, and designs for boats, with sketches of landscape and seascape. At eight, he attempted the figure from nature, and took to making woodcuts. A family magazine, then

started by his sisters, took most of his subsequent drawings; but his progress has been sufficiently followed to show that it was much on the same lines as that of the girls, only a little in advance of theirs. He is still a schoolboy, and has never taken drawing lessons, but sketches from nature with an accurate and rapid pencil, and with a very broad and well-grasped effect when he uses colour.

The youngest child was notoriously backward in her education. She would not learn to read and write, or to do anything which seemed to her savouring of task-work in the schoolroom. But, on the other hand, she would take much trouble with her own chosen employments, and as the series of drawings makes clear, she was devoted to animals and natural history.

Her first "little girl," at three, is curious because she thought she had to draw the forehead somehow, and put a dot there to indicate the fact. But next month she had learnt better, and a fortnight later she painted, characteristically, "A little girl looking at a nest," her own favourite employment. It is signed with her early attempt at her initials, written backwards.

At four, just after her birthday, she followed the family custom of making a book. Hers was "The Adventures of a Clothes Horse," its title being written with shaky legibility (probably copied, without much understanding, from words written down for her), and the rest is all scribble, with pictures of girls on the seashore, their pinafores patterned, and the ground dotted over for stones and sand, or filled with wallpaper flowers. She did not often draw princesses, like her sisters, but "little girls," which came to much the same thing, and she, too, drew boats and flowers. Her "boot," was painted before her fifth birthday, and, as in the other cases, had no influence: but the suggestion of drawing from nature took hold of her even more than the others. At five, she was making real studies of flowers, and shots at the attitude of cats, ridiculously inadequate at first, but soon to improve. Her "little girls" grow less hideous, and at six they are seen in various surroundings of landscape, strongly coloured.

From that time, nearly all her drawings were taken up by the children's magazine, or they are in her little books or sketchbooks. By nine, she was making fair way with her

attempts at the pony in the stable, and her dog lying in various attitudes ; and without knowledge of perspective, she could give a fairly correct view of a house. Then she specialized in birds and cats. The series of her views of nests is not without a real value as natural-history study, though her notes on the subjects are audaciously ill-spelt ; and the cats—one knows how difficult it is to get the proportions of a moving model—are sometimes happily observed.

At eleven, by dint of this independent practice, she became fairly proficient with pencil and brush. Later, she was sent to school, and asked to be allowed to join the drawing class, but she does not seem to intend becoming an artist, and she doesn't sketch as she used, with free and fearless irresponsibility.

On comparing the whole series, and looking also at similar work by other children, one cannot help being struck with the resemblance in the development of the individual to that of mankind in general, as shown in archaeology. Putting out of count the curious realism of palaeolithic tribes, who seem to have made some advance in culture and then to have been swept completely away, our predecessors, perhaps forefathers, went through successive stages in the stone-age, the bronze-age, and the iron-age, before they arrived at any complete pictorial power. In the first they made simple patterns, such circles and zigzags as the children do, before finding out that natural forms can be represented. In the bronze-age they not only elaborated these into connected series of spirals and so forth, but began to carve, on flat rocks, great panoramic views of battles and other events, without perspective or anatomy ; the figures mere lines and knobs, ships and carriages rudely symbolised, just as the children do at three or four : gradually discovering how to draw a face, in childish convention, and a figure, with arms and legs slowly taking their right places. Then, during the earlier iron-age, the people of the north, about whom we can speak with some knowledge of chronology, picked up hints from Roman art ; the stray coin or statuette gave models which they recognised as beyond them, but copied selectively taking what they could assimilate. They still, along with this growing naturalism, spun webs of pattern continually more elaborate, until they lost themselves in the fineness of their

filigree and interlacing. Just so the children, from five or six to ten and eleven, take the illustrations in books and papers, things which one often fancies hardly worth setting them to copy seriously, and find them more useful as teachers than the best-intended efforts of those who wish to push them on to higher aims in art. At last they are ready to learn seriously, and all the previous work bears fruit in cultivated observation and ideals of beauty and poetry long striving for expression.

I do not wish to press the parallel too closely, but it seems to me that it is reasonable, and in accordance with all we know of human development. Our object in arranging for nursery art should be to take advantage of this ascertained form of progress. It is no use trying to go against natural growth : but we may stimulate it—a little ; and direct it—a very little. We may stimulate it by simple encouragement. Nothing checks a child like ridicule ; if you laugh at the ugly figure he meant for a lovely lady, he won't do it again, or if he does he won't let you see the result ; and you have set up a screen between his soul and yours, which no words in after life will ever break down. With most children, even coldness and indifference is enough to stop their efforts. They need not be flattered, but they can always be encouraged : they need not hear you say that they are wasting time ; they are spending seven years in an apprenticeship which will give them hands and eyes for the rest of their lives : an apprenticeship to nature, which gives their parents and teachers no trouble or responsibility, for a child is never so "good" as when he is drawing. Sometimes he may ask, "What shall I draw ?"—and you may be safe in pointing out any object, for as we have seen, all is fish that comes to their net. At school, instead of drawing lessons, children up to ten or twelve might have *drawing hours*, in which they could sketch what they like, and as they like : with the suggestion that to make pictures illustrating their last lesson would be received with favour. I do not see much result from a good deal of the elaborately schemed brush drawing, and pattern making and black-board ambidextrous exercises, lately in vogue. Children can be taught these things, of course, but I doubt if it does much for them beyond giving a trivial

accomplishment. The whole object of teaching is to promote the healthy normal growth of observation and execution, which are possible, however unequally, to most individuals : not to give accomplishments which are accepted by the learner as satisfying substitutes for continued original exertion. Once fix the art energy into a trick, and the trick only remains ; the real interest and impulse are checked and supplanted by a habit of resting on a rule, which is, to art, what living by proverbs is to ethics, and writing in set phrases to literature.

Another, but very essential, form of stimulus is the provision of materials. Artists know how paralysing it is not to have canvas at hand, or paper stretched, and how often the mere fact of finding things ready tempts invention. Let the children have plenty of half-sheets and spoilt envelopes, pencils and cheap colours. Don't give them too many bright paints ; if you keep them to a very few twopenny "student's colours," burnt and raw sienna, Prussian blue, and crimson, they can't go far wrong, or make hopelessly gaudy daubs : whereas the expensive and well-filled colour-box soon becomes a slough of despond in their careless little hands. Fine blocks and sketchbooks become used up or tattered, and somebody will reproach them : waste paper may be spoilt without regret. Spoilt : that is as it happens. If you look for sketches that can be shown as "wonderful," you will be disappointed, unless you are unfortunately the parent of genius. But the healthy, normal child will scribble on, contentedly, so long as he thinks he is regarded with approval. Then comes in the possibility of direction, of which I said that only a very little was possible.

The subjects he will try to draw, will be those which are most present to his memory and imagination. To direct these, means to direct his whole life ; especially to oversee, what is much neglected, the emotional side of his character. We cultivate children's intellect, and we have a care of their bodies ; their morals, and their beliefs, we try to form ; but that they should like what is good, and love what is noble, is the greatest of all the aims of education. An early acquaintance with fine poetry and music, are part of this training, but there is much also in the influence of art and natural scenery. Let them, at any rate, never have the chance to

witness vice and horror ; keep ugly sights and sensational pictures as much as possible away from them. Something of the world's darker side they must know, but need not dwell upon. If they should chance to draw such scenes, and it is not likely, then disapproval may be expressed, and their attention diverted to healthier inspirations. But they will not take every bait ; they will not respond to the offer in which they see your hand too plainly : they snap at the thing which strikes them—often unworthy, we might think, of their notice. We can only see that there is no poison within their reach : and remember that the likeliest poison to a child is a surfeit. If you want to choke a nursery artist, drag him round all the exhibitions, and lecture him on the old masters.

So far, I have spoken only of children's drawing in the nursery, up to the age when, at ten or twelve, they are what we might call professional school-goers. By that time they will have learnt by themselves enough to make real lessons worth while, or to show that they are not likely to profit by giving more time to drawing. What they will have learnt in this way will be known with a certainty, which no hasty forcing through elementary lessons can teach. Many students come to drawing masters at eighteen or twenty, without the least idea of placing the form they are set to copy, or matching the colours of their model. All this should be picked up in childhood, like walking and talking, and I would add reading and writing : so that art teachers need not be expected to handle these late beginners, and push them individually and painfully through "freehand," until it is found out whether they will ever be worth further teaching. But most people can learn drawing ; the power might be to nearly all what the power of writing is, another common faculty, an easy and habitual experience of innumerable things and thoughts, which now, to many, are on the farther side of a locked door.

And by this increase of amateur art, it need not be feared that professional art would suffer. No art can flourish when the mass of the people regard it as a mystery. If we had a nation of sketchers, we should have a nation of appreciators ; a public ripe for a great era in art, which means more in the way of civilisation, and spiritual energy, and general well-being, than we can discuss to-night.